Do No Harm

In 2006, a group of researchers from the University of California—Los Angeles setup a project titled “Tastes, Ties, and Time” (T3) that released 1640 Facebook profile data, it includes profiles of all student of “an entire cohort of students at an anonymous, northeastern American university.” (Zimmer. M, 2010) The researchers attempted to protect the privacy of profile owners and the institution by deleting or encoding all identifying information yet it was still soon identified by the public. (Lewis, K. 2008) The study was supported by Facebook and Harvard’s Institutional Review Board (IRB).

This study was immediately harshly criticized and the researchers were beset with outrage. It was highly controversial and caused a wide debate within social scientists and the public. To my understanding, it is all about privacy control and social respect.

The dataset itself were not what caused the problems, it was the method. There are two parts that caused problems: 1) participants did not consent to offer their data and 2) the third-party review failed.

According to the first principle of Salganik's four principles, that is, respect for the person, getting consent should be the first step of collecting data. The T3 team violated this principle: researchers shall never put participants in an experiment without their consent, no matter how the experiment may benefit the participants. (Salganik, 2017)

One reason why consent from participants is required is privacy. Under the fast pace of emerging science, people are paranoid about being used by the technology rather than the other way round. ” We don't use the Internet; it uses us, and the more personalised any online service appears to be, the less it thinks of you as a person.” (Brooker, 2014). Indeed, as data science evolves, privacy became critical. Think about being tracked by Google map, letting Google calendar do your schedule, saving bank detail on Apple pay, our privacy is exposed to others.

Besides collecting data, releasing the data without consent is more unacceptable. People have right to protect their information. In today’s world, despite the researchers made the profile data anonymous, it was not hard for people to put pieces together to quickly re-identify the source. It will take years for people to totally merge with the world of data, equip the skills to protect their information and build a secure system for data

usage, just like how people react in the very beginning of the banking system dawn. By then, one set of comprehensive regulation that dictate the usage of data that applies to every researchers in the field would become as paramount as laws of privacy control.

Another reason to follow the "respect for person" principle is that, some religious authorities are afraid that, without a complete explanation of a research project and participants' consent, scientists would "unleash forces beyond their control". (Watt, 2014) Admiring astonishing findings and inventions, people are fretted about scientists do things in their own interests and take things from people without their awareness — not knowing or prepared is what drives people mad.

However, when constructing field experiment to study discrimination, this is not the rule for scientists to follow. So for similarly featured experiments, "informed consent for everything" is also not the principle to follow. There are some common features of these experiments: "limited harm, great benefit and weakness of other methods, and non-violation of contextual norms." and under three situations, but not limit to, scientists are granted to not receive informed consent. (Salganik, 2017) After all, "respect for person" is only one aspect of evaluating scientific ethics and should not override other principles, i.e. Beneficence, Justice, and Respect for law and public interest.

Furthermore, speaking of getting consent, researchers can put a line in terms and conditions suggesting when you accept terms and conditions, you accept to take part in any experiments the company conducts or automatically enrolled in scientific researches. Now they get consent. But is this ethical? Knowing the fact that only few people are going to go through every term in the document and set up a pitfall? I don't think so.

The second problem in the T3 project is the failure of the third-party review. Normally, for an experiment involving human subject, the project needs to be reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The Harvard's IRB approved and supported the project, the college even provided student's official housing records to show the endorsement. IRB was established as a esteem third-party to ensure participants' benefit is not compromised, yet Harvard allowed T3 project and ignored objects' rights to control their information and thus lost their credibility, which is the soul of a third-party.

Thus, in my opinion, in the realm of science, one review board should conduct all the reviews regarding human subjects involved experiments rather than let each local IRB do the job; there should be one set of fundamental rules for researchers to follow rather

than several local rules in each institution. Just like what Constitution Law and a Supreme Court do.

I don't regard researchers from Harvard and UCLA as "guilty" conducting such project, because they had no intention to harm and was willing to find a solution to help a large amount people live better. They did not try to evade the board review and they did not violate any law. Yet, though I highly revere their work and agree the dataset is undoubtedly valuable, I personally would not use the data simply because the participants did not consent. There are many things in the world we are capable of obtaining but we just cannot do so. Using the information without the owner's awareness and agreement just sounds like larceny to me.

In a personal view, this result was not anyone's fault. It is an inevitable debate in the era of emerging science when the capabilities of technology grow faster than rules, laws and norms. It grows too fast for the public to accept, adapt and protect themselves, just as in the Romantic era when science unprecedentedly was capable to measure the immeasurables and go far beyond the scope of intuitive practices and personal experiences. Anything beyond our understanding would be naturally categorised as untrustworthy and malign by an instinct of self-protection.

As aforementioned, I believe the key to improving the scientific research environment is a comprehensive regulation, supervised by one leading review board of science and technology. The rules should apply to all researches involving human objects, regardless of the leading team is from a large cooperation or from academia. Once the regulation is implemented, all scientific researchers should be required to take a course to show a full understand of the rules before conducting any other researches.

Additionally, scientists shall constantly promote their project to the public and gain their trust. Regarding privacy, they should also advertise the concept of contextual integrity, that is, an "appropriate flow of personal information", rather than secrecy, to educate the public of what should they really protect. (Nissenbaum, 2010)

Scientists cannot understand everything; Scientists are not capable of doing everything. But with endless curiosity and determination, most of them are attempting to understand the nature, the universe, and the human beings and try to make the world a better place. Ignorance indeed can let one live in a fantasy but scientists abdicated to do so and almost quixotically try to civilise every individual in the world and push the society

moving forward. “Ethic” reviews shall lead them to move in the right direction, but shall never be in their way.

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